

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 26, 2023



ST. JOHN

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

10207 Lincoln Trail
Fairview Heights, IL

Telephone 618-397-6323

e-mail– stjohnuccfairview@gmail.com

Website: www.stjohnfairview.org

Rev. Rosemary Captain

***CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Breath of Life, you animate us.

Many: We come before you are seeking revival from within.

One: Holy One, when you speak, great things happen.

Many: Empower us to make great things happen.

One: Matchless One, you bring good things to life.

Many: We desire to bring good things to life too.

***INVOCATION:**

Life Giver, come and revive us again. Indwell us with your spirit and let our souls awake to joy. We come boldly that you might breathe on us. May what we experience with you today change us forever and for the better. Amen

***UNISON PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE**

Mender of Hearts, we confess that sometimes in our brokenness, we cause brokenness in others. Sometimes in our woundedness, we wound others. In these despairing moments, we need healing and restoration. We give thanks that we are never beyond your reach or grace. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

God's mercy makes wholeness possible and our wholeness is rooted in becoming who we are meant to be—living sanctuaries. Amen.

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Valley of dry bones

37 The LORD's power overcame me, and while I was in the LORD's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. ² He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³ He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "LORD God, only you know." ⁴ He said to me,

“Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the LORD’s word!

⁵ The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. ⁶ I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD.”

⁷ I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. ⁸ When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them.

⁹ He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The LORD God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.”

¹⁰ I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. ¹¹ He said to me, “Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’

¹² So now, prophecy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel’s fertile land. ¹³ You will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people.

¹⁴ I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am

the LORD. I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the LORD says.”

EPISTLE READING: Romans 8:6-11

⁶ The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. ⁷ So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn’t submit to God’s Law, because it can’t. ⁸ People who are self-centered aren’t able to please God.

⁹ But you aren’t self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God’s Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, they don’t belong to him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God’s righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. ¹¹ If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.

***GOSPEL LESSON: John 11:1-45**

Lazarus is ill

11 A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (² This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.”

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This illness isn’t fatal. It’s for the glory of God so that God’s Son can be glorified through it.” ⁵ Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. ⁶ When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed

where he was. After two days,⁷ he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again."⁸ The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?"⁹ Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world.¹⁰ But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them."

¹¹ He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up."¹² The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well."¹³ They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death.

¹⁴ Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died.¹⁵ For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

¹⁶ Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus."

Jesus with Martha and Mary

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.¹⁸ Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem.¹⁹ Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."²² Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."²³ Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.²⁶ Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

²⁸ After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you."²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus.³⁰ He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him.³¹ When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

³² When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled.³⁴ He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see."

³⁵ Jesus began to cry.³⁶ The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!"³⁷ But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

Jesus at Lazarus' tomb

³⁸ Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance.³⁹ Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the

sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.”

⁴⁰ Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” ⁴¹ So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. ⁴² I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

MESSAGE: “What is God doing?”

Why didn’t Jesus do anything when he received the message from the sisters, the cry for help, the emergency-come-quickly appeal? Jesus stayed where he was for two days. He didn’t even mention it to the disciples. He didn’t make preparations to go. He didn’t send messages back to say “we’re on our way.” He just stayed there. And Mary and Martha, in Bethany, watched their beloved brother die.

What was Jesus doing? From the rest of the story, I think we can tell. He was praying. He was wrestling with the father’s will. The disciples were quite right in verse 8, when they warned Jesus that he would be in danger if he went to Bethany. The Judeans had been wanting to stone him, and surely he wouldn’t think of going back there yet?

Bethany was and is a small town just two miles or so from Jerusalem, on the eastern slopes of the Mount of

Olives. Once you’re there, you’re within easy reach of the holy city. And who knows what would happen this time.

It’s important for us to realize that this wonderful story about Lazarus, one of the most powerful and moving in the whole Bible, is not just about Lazarus. It’s also about Jesus. When Jesus thanks the father that God had heard his prayer in verses 41-41. I think he was referring to the prayers he prayed during those two strange, silent days in the wilderness across the Jordan. He was praying for Lazarus, but he was also praying for wisdom and guidance as to his own plans and movements. Somehow the two were bound up together. What Jesus was going to do for Lazarus would be, on the one hand, a principal reason why the authorities would want him out of the way (verses 45-53). But it would be, on the other hand, the most powerful sign or miracle yet.

Can you imagine? If Jesus heals Lazarus, everyone in the region would hear about it, including the high priests, the pharisees, the religious authorities, to mention just a few of Jesus’ enemies.

The time of waiting by Jesus, therefore, was vital. As so often, Jesus needed to be in prayer, exploring God’s will in that intimacy and union of which he often spoke. Only then would he act – not in the way Mary and Martha had wanted him to do, but in a manner beyond their wildest dreams.

After God gave Jesus direction, Jesus prayed that the body of Lazarus would remain pristine until he got there; no decay, no rotting. When Jesus had the stone rolled away from the tomb of Lazarus, Martha worried about the smell because Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus knew

his prayers had been answered; there was no odor and Lazarus was able to walk out of the tomb.

This story is all about the ways in which Jesus surprises people and overturns their expectations. He didn't go when the sisters asked him. He spoke about "sleep", meaning death, and the disciples thought he meant ordinary sleep. And, in the middle (verse 9) , he told them in a strange little saying that people who walk in the daytime don't trip up, but people who walk around in the darkness do. What did he mean?

He seems to have meant that the only way to know where you are going is to follow Jesus. If we try to steer our own course by our own understanding, we'll trip up, because we will be in the dark. However, when we stick close to him, and see the situation from his point of view, then, even if it means days and perhaps years of puzzlement, wondering why nothing seems to be happening, we will come out at the right place in the end.

How many of us have lost patience waiting for God to answer our prayers for direction? So we go ahead and do whatever we want. Who do we blame when our ideas don't go well? Its not God's fault. It's our lack of patience and faith.

Jesus waited and the results were better than the wildest dreams by Martha and Mary. Imagine what would happen if we always would pray and wait. What are your wildest dreams?

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with a time for personal silent prayer.

As we near Holy Week, O God, we are grateful for your guidance as we learn to love your Son more and more. We

listen to his words and are inspired to follow him. God, this is your gift to us, we can't thank and praise you enough.

We pray that all people of the world would have the opportunity to hear your son's words. We are thankful for missionaries around the world who are doing their best to feed and shelter those in harm's way. Their care and compassion speak louder than words from a Bible.

We pray for all those who are committed to the least of these in our country and in our community. Their work is God's work, that not many people would do.

We pray for all those on our prayer list and all those who no longer leave their homes for fear of falling or lack of transportation. Bring comfort to all those who are in pain, feel lonely, or who are grieving.

Be with us as the days of passion grow closer. May our hearts be opened to your glory through out this season. . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

God is the source of our supply. Let us give from what we have been supplied. May this supply meet every demand. Amen.

***PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

Divine Sustainer, receive this offering that we gladly give.
May it be used to revive and restore those in need. Amen

***BENEDICTION:**

As we go our separate ways, remember that God has
placed God's Spirit within in you. Go forth centered in God
and let God be centered in you. Amen.

PRAYER LIST: Urban Baum, David Seneczyn, Theo Mally,
Becky Ballard, Rosemary Williams, Jack O'Day, Ronald Bopp,
Syd Safriet, and Nancy's friend Mary, Michael Schlosser.